Hamby, Most Remarkable Criminal City Has Known

By Bertram Reinitz

GORDON FAWCETT HAMBY wants to be hurried into the electric chair, avoiding all the law's delays, before the ennui growing out of this business of being tried and condemned for murder in the first degree kills him.

He has heard a little of the last few hours in the death house and the short walk to and through the little green door. He feels that these might provide some refreshing diversion, a change from the humdrum, monotonous existence of a man regarded as the most dangerous and most cultured criminal in the history of this state.

When the foreman of the jury announced, after fourteen hours of trial, that Hamby was guilty of the murder of De Witt C. Peal, killed during a $13,000 robbery of the East Brooklyn Savings Bank on December 13 last, Hamby looked intensely relieved—as another man might have looked had he been acquitted. With the verdict, he explained later, the "thing" was over. These lawyers with their speeches and the crowd with its curiosity—they were beresome things to a man who had robbed thirteen banks and participated in nine shootings, five resulting fatally.

He has no desire to utilize his predicament to satisfy the human desire for dramatic byplay. He proved that he is sincere in his indifference and disinterest by completely ignoring the audience, which included about fifty women.

Scorns Bravado

He scorned bravado as he did the merest trace of weakening. He had intended to say a few things, commending the judge, jury and district attorney for speeding up the trial and getting the iresome details over with He withheld his little speech, he said, afterward, because he thought that some one might misconstrue it as "a histrionic display."

When he heard that there had been women in the courtroom leaning forward eagerly to hear some expression from the prisoner, he regretted his silence. It was "discourteous" to ignore "ladies' wishes" so completely, he said. Women are to be revered and entertained. He apologized for his selfishness—but perhaps he might conduct himself henceforth in a way that would at least make good reading for the women. His innocuous blue eyes laughed and danced as he spoke, just as they played when Justice Fawcett characterized him as a criminal whose record made that of Jesse James or any other bandit pale by comparison.

He said he did not smile because he had been properly classified; that he had worked toward this place in the criminal sun an felt officially recognized. He smiled, he said, because people looked on things so differently, because they could not see as he did that a man who robbed a bank faced odds of 20 to 1, with the proceeds on his investment death or "five-figured" money. That wasn't crime, he reasoned mildly; it was business—big business—and he had gone bankrupt.

Conducts Own Propaganda

Hamby has been conducting propaganda in his unostentatious way. He wants it understood that he is not a burglar or a murderer. His visit at the bank was a commercial transaction, he pointed out. He had regarded his pistols as things which commanded attention and obedience. They were not instruments of death as he saw them. They became such unexpectedly, but not unwillingly. Peal and Coons had died because they had failed to appreciate that disobedience and death were one. Out West the murders would not have happened, Hamby pointed out. It is religion to bank employes to snap with prompt obedience when a man with a gun makes suggestions.

Profanity is the language of the weak, according to Hamby. He never utters an invective, however poor the prison fare may be or how obstinate his light locks may be to the persuasion of a missing-tooth prison comb. He does not even verbally assail the friend to whom, he says, he intrusted $7,000 or $8,000 and who has slipped into oblivion, leaving Hamby without cigarette money. Nor does he regret the $1,000 he gave to the young woman who accompanied him from New York to the coast. She was not a good woman, Hamby said, but she was loyal and levelheaded. A solitaire ring, marriage ring with no significance and a set of furs were some of his gifts to her.

Hamby has one great fear. His attorney, Frank X. McCaffrey, hight appeal his case. That would mean time lost—time spent in thick stone walls in green summer time. Perhaps the Great Beyond has something exciting in store for him—certainly it can't be worse than prison life on earth.

Yearns for Beyond

This soft spoken, clear eyed youth, with the broad, lithesome shoulders, who smiles as he tells of killings and laughs as he describes his robbings, wants it known that he yearns for death because there are no purling brooks in prisons, or grassy slopes, or the full sweeping play of the sunlight.

Hamby was a "lifer" in Tacoma when he mildly informed the local District Attorney that he had committed a capital crime in Brooklyn.

In Tacoma he had killed a friend because that friend's eyes narrowed and sparkled during an argument. In Brooklyn, he explained, he had killed two strangers because they had sought to protect their employer's property in a holdup. It was the famous East Brooklyn Savings Bank robbery, on December 13 last, during the commission of which De Witt C. Peal, an assistant cashier, and Henry Coons, a teller, were shot to death.

"Brooklyn offered me death," Hamby said simply. "Death was preferable, by far, very far, to a life in prison walls—my God, just think waking up in the morning and seeing that"—he indicated a sweep of sunlight that flooded the courtroom windows—"streaked by the shadows cast by iron bars!"

Hamby seemed interested, enthusiastic, for the first time. He seemed to cast off the lethargic indifference with which he has cloaked all emotion during his trial. His smooth, boyish face became even younger as his customary pallor gave way before a newly induced flow of blood. When Hamby entered the courtroom for the first time last Monday the women present gasped in astonishment and almost chorused, "How handsome, how charming!" With color in his face, the actually classic lines were brought out in bolder relief, and crime easily captured the beauty prize in the courtroom.

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Hamby, in a hurry to die

Becomes Poet

As he discussed his love for the untrammelled things of the sphere he may so soon leave this confessed murderer and robber became the simple, unaffected poet. Robberies and murders drifted off into the summery haze and there came back to him instead softened, pretty pictures out of the great volume, There-might-have-been.

"Smells nicely, doesn't it?" he remarked as a breezy finger of the sunlit day touched him lightly on the nostrils. The breeze had crept over the spacious lawn in the rear of the Supreme Court house before fluttering in the window.

"And to think," he went on, "they wanted to keep me from that forever. Day after day I would have been forced to love nature through heavy masonry, to breathe it blended with the dank smells of a Western prison.

"Is it any wonder that I prefer death? Why was the trial held? There is nothing in life for me in prison; there is everything in life outside. If I was to spend it in prison I would be wishing for and hoping for a quick death. This is the better way. No illness—nothing. I have tried to commit suicide by confessing. I hope I have succeeded.

"Let me ask anybody—how about yourself—would you sooner die or live in jail? Was it Horace Greely or Patrick Henry who said, 'Give me liberty or give me death'? The man who said that was a great personage, because he knew what he was talking about. It is impossible for me to fully state my preference for death to a life within prison walls. It would be torture to know that outside the streams and things were calling, while inside I was taking on the prison pallor.

"Suppose I escaped in a few years! That would mean nothing. I would be an ex-convict, stamped wherever I went by the expression on my face, the unmistakable badge of caged things."

Loves Open Sea

This murderer, who craves for the sunshine, loves the open sea in the same wild, wholesouled way. He said that he shipped aboard merchantmen or tankers again and again, not so much to escape from too efficient detectives, but to get into the midst of the real out of doors.

His taste in literature reflects his yearning for the sea. He enumerated his favorite books, with a disappointing similarity and absence of novels and adventure stories.

"I went through most of the stuff which every young fellow reads," he said. "There was Dickens and Sir Walter Scott, I suppose, and a few of the other authors, in whom enjoyment is lost because it is sometimes compulsory to read them. Books on navigation are my favorites."

During the hours he spent in Raymond Street jail Hamby perused Bowsprit's "Navigation," said by naval men to be one of the most advanced and comprehensive works on pathfinding through the sea. Hamby has among his effects a warrant showing that he has the authorization to ship as third mate.

There are no women playing star roles in Hamby's case. He seems to have confined his love to the beautiful in landscape. He admits that a few women came into his life at various times, but none played leading rôles. When he might have been weaving a charming romance he was roaming the mountains or sailing the seas. Although he was respect personified in his few references to girls, he nevertheless discredits them entirely from a professional standpoint. Chains are as strong as their weakest links, he said, and sometimes women become weak indeed. He has no opinion on woman suffrage. Perhaps Hamby's affairs of the heart have been frequently recurrent and deeply interesting. But Hamby is an innate gentleman, a cavalier who probably wooed and won, but has a natural chivalrous distaste to his amorous matters being given undue publicity.

"I prefer working alone," he said. "It is thrilling, and I am sure of myself.

"In fact, it was the thrill that urged me into this game. I was at college. I needed the money. The life certainly appealed to me. At eighteen years of age I had successfully completed my first job. For eight years I have been living off my winnings in my game with prison and death.

"Before the East Brooklyn Savings Bank robbery I had never killed, because the tellers in a Western bank know better than to disobey a man with a gun. They do as they are told. Peal and Coons disobeyed and it was their loss.

"The thing that hurts most is that I was finally sent to prison for something I greatly regret. Davis was a good fellow, but I thought he was going to shoot me. I found out later that he wasn't even armed."

Hamby communed with nature during his last few hours of liberty. After killing Davis he walked twenty miles through the mountains to a tiny settlement. He entered the general store, with three deputy sheriffs closing in on him.

"The walk had been exhilarating and wonderful," he said. "I will remember it. The three men following me had not alarmed me. My mind had been working fast. Remorse over killing Davis was heavy on me and I didn't know whether to give myself up or commit suicide. I tossed a coin, but it rolled away in the darkness.

"I told the proprietor of the general store who I was. I gave him the two revolvers I usually carried. But still there was hope for me. I could have grabbed up an automatic rifle which lay in a corner of the place and put a quick finish to my pursuers. But they were family men—and I was a bit tired of it all. Then they came and took me to Tacoma, where I was, unexpectedly, too, convicted."

Accomplice a Mystery

Hamby's accomplice remains as great a mystery as the real identity of Hamby himself. He wants to be known as Jay Boyd Allen, because, he explained, it is quite close to his real name. But of the shorter man of the two who spread death and blood on the floor of the peaceful old-fashioned bank in Brooklyn he has nothing to say other than:

"He was an amateur and a petty larceny thief. He was not accustomed to five-figured jobs. I won't give him away. I know where he is. But he will come to the end of his rope some day, in a few years. He will learn his lesson, bitterly, too, I suppose."

Then Hamby fingered his velour hat and sought for his right cuff with his left hand, instinctively. He felt the manacle and shook his arm a trifle impatiently. Then he looked out of the courtroom window to where a small boy was chasing a ball on the courthouse lawn, fearful that he would be gathered in by a policeman. A zephyr stirred and disturbed a few locks of Hamby's sleekly combed hair. He looked down at the manacled wrist again.

"Is it any wonder that I would sooner be dead?" this nature-loving murderer said softly.

The Passing of a Grand Old Police Chief

WILLIAM S. DEVERY, New York's most famous chief of police, who died recently at his home in Rockaway, was for twenty-five years successively patrolman, roundsman, captain, inspector, deputy chief and chief.

"Big Bill" was appointed to the force in 1881. He became a roundsman in 1884, a captain in 1891 and an inspector in 1898. Almost immediately thereafter he was made a deputy chief and then chief. He held this office about four years. Early in 1901 the Legislature passed a law abolishing the post of chief and Devery became a deputy commissioner.

Devery had often said he was "born to be a cop," and when he was shelved as a deputy commissioner he soon quit and went into the real estate business. He said he couldn't bear the thought of being a desk man at Headquarters.

By Charles A. Salomon

WITH the passing of William S. Devery New York has lost one more of the picturesque characters that contributed to the gayety of metropolitan life a decade ago. By only a short span did "Big Bill" survive former Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck, who pronounced him the "Best Chief of Police New York ever had," a characterization that stuck, although often applied in a sense of derision.

Chief Devery was a figure in New York life in a period when nicknames were given men prominent in politics and official place, a practice not so prevalent to-day.

So Chief Devery, the last police official of that rank New York was to have, became "Big Bill."

And it was fitting. "Big Bill" Devery was big not only in the matter of physique, but also in the matter of the power he wielded. As a patrolman and in the higher grades he filled in his climb to the office of chief, Devery made frequent use of his bulk and strength and proved his physical courage. Also, whether one may be permitted to call it moral courage or not, Devery as head of the Police Department proved himself a fighter, a man who never "laid down." His career as chief was marked by one fight after another with elements that regarded him as a blot on the escutcheon of this fair town. On his massive head and broad, deep shoulders were visited the unrestrained criticisms of men who differed with his way of running the Police Department. He stood up under all these charges, and indictments made him fight back all the harder for his job and power. Devery was beaten only when the office of Chief of Police was legislated out of existence. Even then he didn't give up, for to his last days he insisted, "I didn't get a fair count. I am still Chief of Police, only the office doesn't exist any more."

Devery never dodged a controversy with what he was pleased to term "them reform blokes" (the term "guy" was not in use in his day). "All policeman," was the way one Police Commissioner indorsed Big Bill. He was just that. From cop to chief, he spent about twenty-five years of his life in police work.

A Sense of Humor

Devery did not always consider himself in the right in his many controversies with his critics. He was a born fighter and he just would not let the other fellow "get away with it." Aside from the fact that he was a fighter, the chief had a saving quality, a sense of humor, which he frequently indulged at the expense of some other person. Often he was unconsciously funny. Once, for instance, when complaint was made to him by certain reform politicians of methods they feared would be used at a coming election, Devery's way of settling the matter was to issue instructions to his policemen, "If them silk stocking blokes interfere with you, stand them on their heads." When "Big Bill" gave an order like this he meant that it should be carried out as nearly literally as possible.

Devery's attitude toward reform was like that of the late Colonel Asa Bird Gardiner, who, when District Attorney, said, "To hell with reform." The difference was that Colonel Gardiner was removed from office for his attitude by Governor Roosevelt. Devery, too, was removed from office at one time in his turbulent career, but, unlike Gardiner, he came back.

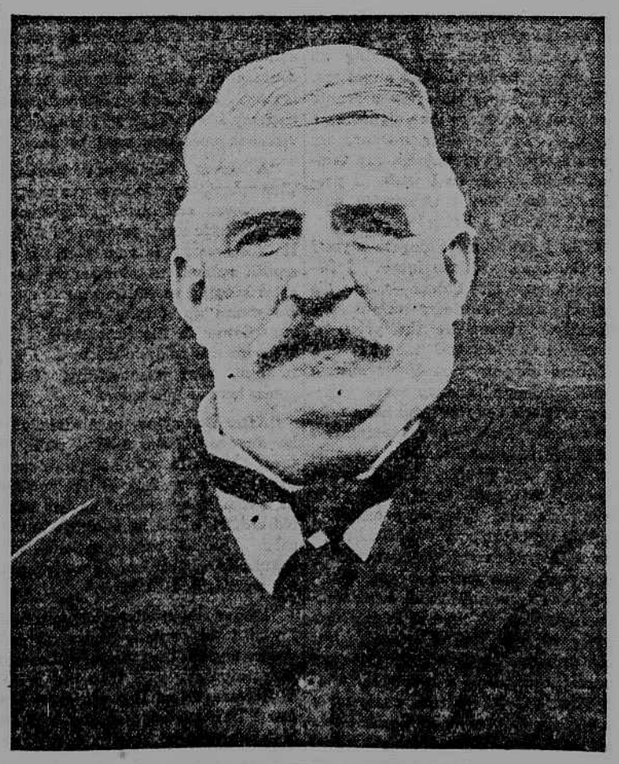
Devery was a man of big deeds. Besides, he could intelligently direct the work of detectives, for, although perhaps not generally known, he had done such work for his friend, Inspector Thomas F. Byrnes, for many years chief of the detective bureau and one of the cleverest.

"Get the Big Fellers"

This policy of handling big matters Devery took with him to 300 Mulberry Street, then Police Headquarters. He taught his men to get the "big fellers." Brought up in the school of hard knocks, the "best chief ever" knew how to take them—and give them. Devery never was more in his element than when he could appear at some great public function, arrayed in his best uniform, and personally direct the work of his men. I have seen him at such affairs do the work of the ordinary cop. His presence was an incentive and assurance to his men. They knew the chief would be with them so long as they carried out orders. It is difficult to picture any such outbreaks in Devery's day as have lately marked the activities of the Bolshevik element in New York. Devery would have suppressed any such public demonstrations if he had to have the city float a special issue of revenue bonds to buy a new supply of nightsticks. And he would not have been content to "let George do it." He would have been there to help.

"Big Bill" would have considered it a slur on his official dignity and an insult to his police ability to have outside police agencies brought in to handle such a situation. There were anarchists in this city in Devery's day, but they were a very, very quiet crowd. "Religious maniacs," he called them. They were all chartad and never got the least leeway for the carrying out of their principles. Devery's first arraignments as a cop—about forty years ago—were along the riverfront, at that time infested with the toughest characters, to whom diplomacy was something akin to cowardice. Devery didn't try to be a diplomat. He met the roughnecks on their own terms and beat them at their own rough and tumble game, in which the stout locust was the deciding factor in many a battle. The men along Devery's post came to fear this big, broad shouldered and fearless cop. Undoubtedly it was this early experience that made him the king of clubs, for Devery was always a firm believer in the persuasiveness of the nightstick. Many a youngster just getting on the wrong path through bad company has been set right through a few well directed blows across the upper part of the legs with a nightstick. And how those Corkonian giants could make their blows sting! Breadth of forehead was not such a factor in getting on the force in those days as depth of chest and circumference of biceps. The Devery cops were such adepts at club wielding that they could temper their blows to make them hurt without doing any physical damage. For hardened characters Devery favored more of an allopathic dose and not necessarily local. "These reform blokes," "Big Bill" used to say, "don't want the cops to carry nightsticks. They ought to furnish 'em with bologna sausages."

There was nothing "namby-pamby" about Chief Devery. Devery was a bitter opponent as well as an adept at coining nicknames for persons he didn't like. He once fixed on "Chesty George" in describing the late Inspector George McCluskey. To the time of his death the dapper, well groomed McCluskey was known as "Chesty George."



The late William S. Devery

Undoubtedly Devery did enjoy certain political support. Being a member of the uniformed force, however, he was not subject to the whim and caprice of the Mayor, and could be removed only on charges or, as Devery was, by his office being put out of existence.

His Picturesque Tongue

Felonious crimes were Devery's forte, and while perhaps he was at times neglectful in suppressing misdemeanors, he would have considered his department disgraced if big crimes went unpunished while detectives were engaged in running down crap shooters. Devery's language frequently was quite as picturesque as his personality, but it never required any interpretation. In one of the cases where charges were made against him he was acquitted, although the trial judge held that the chief had been "indecorous and offensive." Charges of extortion and oppression rolled off his shoulders like water off an oilskin coat. Once the Police Commissioners "got" him. That was in 1894. He was tried, found guilty and dismissed. He was back on the force ten months later, more powerful than ever and just as talkative.

He continued in the department six years after being restored to duty, when finally the curtain was rung down on Devery's police career, in 1901, by an act of Legislature abolishing his office, which step had to be taken to abolish "Big Bill" as head of the department. One thing the old-timers still say about the chief, "He never squealed." No man knew the ins and outs of the Police Department more intimately than he. He knew what every man in authority was doing and had done. Testimony was given before the Lexow committee, investigating police affairs, that Devery's agents had extorted money of which it was sought to prove that he got his "divvy." It was not in the Devery code to admit receiving graft money and thus besmirch the department and other men, although the way for such action had been paved by another officer, later to become the highest uniformed official of the department, who admitted taking graft money.

Devery once declared, "I ain't a politician. I couldn't get a bag of double jointed peanuts from Tammany Hall." Shrewd in matters of business, Devery never fell for the Wall Street game which wiped out the fortunes of Tom Byrnes, "Little Tim" Sullivan and Pat McCarren. He made judicious investments in real estate in this city and also at Far Rockaway. On his leaving the Police Department, however, "Big Bill" did fall for the game of politics. His liking of public attention and his sense of humor, perhaps, had more to do with his entering the political arena than any real hope or belief that he could be elected to high office. That new field changed him from a picturesque figure to a grotesque figure. He was leader, but the organization frowned on his efforts to be one of its leaders. "Big Bill" had many friends in his home district, the Ninth, which is on the West Side. His open air political headquarters was at a pump at Eighth Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street. This fire hydrant became famous as the rallying point of the Deveryites and received the dignity of upper case letters, being referred to only as "The Pump." Leaning against it, "Big Bill" used to expound his views and utter his Deveryisms.

"Too Top Tilty"

Then a most unexpected thing happened. Devery was elected leader of the Ninth Assembly District over two other candidates. Deveryism having become a political issue and being used against Tammany Hall, the organization refused to seat him as one of its executive council. Devery, the fighter, who already had full grown plans to succeed Richard Croker as Boss of Tammany Hall, was enraged over this treatment. "Say, young feller, this bunch is getting too top-tilty," said he when asked to say something about the treatment accorded him. "With Platt and Odell running one end and this bunch of jumping-jacks touting for the other, what chance has an honest man got? I'll tell you that next fall an independent movement will come along that will push the whole bunch into a snowdrift. This was a surprise to me. They never tipped me off that there was going to be a raid."

Continuing, he paid his respects to Charles F. Murphy, Senator George W. Plunkitt, Daniel F. McMahon, a Tammany leader, and Timothy D. ("Big Tim") Sullivan in these words: "Why, Penn. Xharle, New York Central Plunk, Dago Dan and Big Bluff Tim, if these four men think they can run four million people they have got bats in the bridge tower. Look out for me."

Devery had been accepted as a member of the Democratic Club on Fifth Avenue, and he thought that was fully as good as Tammany Hall in Fourteenth Street. But he was cast out for good, although not cast down. Did Devery quit? Not he. There was no such word in his lexicon; no such thought ever came to his mind. He would just show those "blokes" by running for Mayor of New York. He obtained a sufficient number of names to a nominating petition, and lo and behold! "Big Bill" was an independent candidate for Mayor. His emblem was "The Pump," not by any means to stand as the emblem of prohibition, as the fountain does for the Prohibition party, but because Devery and "The Pump" had become identified with each other in politics. Devery burned much red fire in his campaign and some money.

A Real Family Man

After that he spent most of his time on his Far Rockaway property. He moved his city home to the upper West Side. Always a family man, a good father and a loving husband, he never drifted far from his fireside. His last active interest in the civic affairs of New York was his effort to have Rockaway declared a city apart from the municipal control of New York City. It was suspected that "Big Bill" had renewed ambition to be mayor of a town. He disclaimed any such ambition in his campaign for the independence of Rockaway.

My guess is that Devery accumulated by means of his real estate operations a fortune of between $500,000 and $1,000,000.

Oh, yes. "Big Bill," buffeted about as he had been in his twenty-five years on the police force, never soured against the world. He was cheerful Devery to the last. And, having a kindness shown him by Mayor Van Wyck, he passed it along to Mayor Hylan, who, he said, was "the best Mayor ever." "Big Bill's" sense of humor never deserted him.